Concept evaluation in focus groups: Semantic fields and evaluative strategies

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Focus groups have traditionally been used in market research, and to a lesser degree in social science, but they have more recently gained currency in other areas, like education and pre-testing of Government decisions with the electorate.[1] With this paper, I hope to make a contribution to the study of focus groups that are used in market research. I have chosen market research as the source of my data, because the use of focus groups in marketing is still the most widespread, and considering that it has been going on longer and more extensively than in the other areas, one would expect it to have reached a greater degree of sophistication. Additionally, the use of focus groups in education and politics has been part of a trend toward their marketization (see Fairclough 1995). If one wants to gain a thorough understanding of the pervasive influence of marketing in such important social institutions, starting with an investigation of marketing itself may be best.

Two aspects of focus groups have so far attracted the most attention from academic researchers — organization and conducting of the groups on the one hand, and details of interaction between group moderators and participants on the other. Organization and conducting of the groups includes selection of participants, preparation of questions, and at times a brief mention of the interpretation of results (see e.g. Morgan 1997, Kitzinger 1995). Analyses of interaction between group moderators and participants has taken the form of textual analyses from pragmatic and conversation-analytic perspectives (see e.g. Myers 1998, Puchta and Potter 1999), with such analyses sometimes being placed in a wider ethnographic context (Agar and MacDonalds 1995).

The present paper is different from the ones mentioned above because it reports on the process of evaluation by focus group participants of ideas prepared by market researchers. Its main purpose is to identify the criteria that are used by the participants to evaluate the proposed ideas.

In the project I followed, the marketers' ideas were presented to the groups in the form of what in market research is called stimulus material

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or concept boards, which are multimodal texts consisting of verbal text and images.

Apart from analyzing focus group participants' responses to the concept boards, identifying the evaluation criteria also involves an analysis of the boards themselves, because the criteria consist in relating various aspects of the boards to the focus group participants' experience or knowledge. The aspects of the boards that the evaluation criteria focus on are conceptualized as semantic fields and are described in detail in the next section.

I spent three months working with a market research company on the project that is the subject of this paper. The company had a brief from a toiletries firm, whose main product was an aftershave for young men, to develop and test concepts for expanding production into areas other than just toiletries. The company first identified the target audience's possible areas of interest by carrying out observational research and several preliminary focus groups, then created the concepts in think tanks, after which these were represented in concept boards and shown in focus groups. The feedback that was obtained from focus group participants was interpreted by group moderators, who produced a debrief report that was presented to the client firm.

The target audience was young men between 16 and 24 years of age. There were six focus groups, with eight men each, and each group lasted three hours. The main variable according to which the groups were differentiated was the men's age. There were two groups of 16-year-olds, two of 18- to 19-year-olds, one of 20- to 21-year-olds, and one of 23- to 24-year-olds. There was little variation in the evaluation of the concept boards among the different groups.

Semantic fields

The representations of ideas in the concept boards are conceptualized as semantic fields, which are fields of lexical meaning, structured by both paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. The most significant recent work on semantic fields was done by Lyons (1977, see also Lyons 1963, 1968). I first discuss his paradigmatic relations, of which there are four basic kinds: contrast, hyponymy, synonymy, and meronymy.

Lyons identifies four binary contrasts. Antonymy are gradable, such as *big* versus *small*, complementaries are non-gradable, like *male* versus *female*. Converses are pairs like *husband* and *wife*, and directional opposites are pairs with an implied motion in opposite directions, such as *arrive* and *depart*. Lyons further identifies two non-binary contrasts. Series have two outermost members between which the others are ordered, as in *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, *poor*, *bad*, *atrocious.* Cycles do not have outermost members, and every member is ordered between two others, as in *Sunday*, *Monday*, . . . *Saturday*.

Lyons's hyponymy is a relationship of non-transitive inclusion, holding between a more general, superordinate, lexical item (e.g. *flower*) and a more specific, subordinate, lexical item (e.g. *rose*). Synonymy is a relationship of transitive inclusion, i.e. of meaning overlap in either direction, such as between *lady* and *woman*. Meronymy is a part/whole relationship, which holds between, for example, *wheel* and *bicycle*.

Similar kinds of lexical relationships are dealt with under the heading of lexical cohesion by Halliday and Hasan (1974), Halliday (1985), and Hasan (1985), and are considered one kind of relations that make a text hang together by giving it 'texture'. Halliday and Hasan's typology changes in the different publications, the clearest perhaps being in Hasan (1985), who distinguishes among antonymy, which is simply a relationship of oppositeness of experiential (cognitive) meaning; synonymy, which is a relationship of identity, without total overlap, of experiential meaning; hyponymy, which is a relationship between a general class and its subclasses; and meronymy, which is a part/whole relationship. Halliday and Hasan also include repetition, which is a cohesive relationship between instances of the same lexical item, but does not function to structure semantic fields.

According to Lyons (1977: 261), semantic fields are also structured by the syntagmatic relationship of collocation. He points out that collocation was already used by Porzig (1934) and further developed in Porzig (1950). The name with which the concept seems to be predominantly associated, however, is J. R. Firth (e.g. 1957 [1951], 1957). Collocation was further elaborated by Halliday (1961) and especially by Sinclair (e.g. 1987) and was considered by Halliday and Hasan (1974) and Halliday (1985) a kind of lexical cohesion.

Collocation, according to Firth (1957 [1951], 1957) and Halliday (1966), is a relationship of mutual expectation, such as that between *night* and *dark*. Halliday (1985) points out that making explicit the semantic relationships between lexical items that collocate has proven difficult and that, in any case, the items' cohesive effect is rather due to their regular occurrence in physical proximity to one another, which sets up a feeling of expectation. This has, however, not prevented linguists from attempting to specify such semantic relations. Lyons (1977: 262), for example, uses the term 'encapsulation' to refer to one of the semantic relations that seem to obtain between collocating lexical items.

Martin (1992) models the meaning relations between collocating lexical items by Halliday's (1985) logico-semantic relations of expansion. I discuss Martin's approach in some detail because it is an original recent development and is made use of later, when modeling semantic field structures. According to Halliday (1985: 202–227), there are three basic types of expansion: elaboration, extension, and enhancement. Halliday conceives of them as relationships between processes, usually expressed in the grammar as clauses in the clause complex (complex sentence), but they are discussed here in relation to lexical items. The discussion is based on Martin (1992: 309–321) and Halliday (1985).

Elaboration is concerned with further specifying or refining a meaning. A lexical item does not introduce a new meaning, but rather provides a further subclassification of one that is already present. Examples are 'sing' and 'song', 'ask' and 'question', and 'tell' and 'story'. In each case, the second member of the pair further specifies the first. The elaboration relationship is the closest to Lyons's encapsulation, and to Porzig's (1950: 68, quoted in Lyons 1977: 261) pairs 'lick' and 'tongue', and 'bite' and 'teeth'.

In extension, distinct meanings are habitually combined, with the meaning of one lexical item affecting the meaning of another in some way, or providing its scope or domain. Examples of the former are 'shoot' and 'terrorist', and 'hug' and 'friend', examples of the latter 'climb' and 'mountain', and 'play' and 'piano'. This kind of relationship is the closest to Porzig's (1950: 68) pairs 'fell' and 'trees'.

In enhancement, one meaning qualifies another circumstantially, by way of location, manner, matter, extent, etc. (see Halliday 1985: 137–144). An example of a relationship of location is between 'car' and 'park' (cars are usually left in parks); an example of manner is between 'beat' and 'stick' (beating often happens with a stick); an example of matter is between 'compensation' and 'losses' (losses tend to be compensated for); and an example of extent is 'walk' and 'miles' (one often walks for miles, literally or metaphorically).

Both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations that structure semantic fields bring up the questions of the extent to which they are context-specific, and of the units between which they obtain. Lyons (1997: 268) considers the relations to link lexemes, which are units of the linguistic system, and the semantic fields to be subsets of the vocabulary. He does not discuss the influence of context to a great extent beyond pointing out that it has to be taken into account, and that some of the relations originate in specific contexts and are later generalized, whereas for others the direction is in the way of specialization (see Lyons 1977: 265–269).

Martin (1992: 326) considers cohesive relations to link 'message parts', which are units of discourse realized in the unmarked case by lexical items, whereas marked realizations are lexicogrammatical structures that can be substituted by a single lexical item, e.g. *think over* (*consider*), *skating rink* (*rink*), etc. The relations that obtain between message parts he takes to be context-specific. The context in question is the situation type (Halliday 1978), renamed by Martin as 'register.'

The context of the relations that structure semantic fields in this study is even more specific. It is the particular situation realized by the particular multimodal text of a concept board. The units between which the lexical relations obtain are determined by such instantial contexts. The relations, in other words, obtain between such units that contrast with, are similar to, collocate with, etc., within these particular contexts. They may be generalized enough to also obtain within situation (and text) types, and indeed within the linguistic system, but what matters is that they hold within the instantial contexts realized in the boards.

The units themselves may be realized by as many or few lexical items as are necessary. For want of a better term, the units will be called 'concepts'.[2] In one of the semantic fields analyzed below, for example, a hyponymic relationship is set up between the superordinate *things*, and the co-hyponymy *cars*, *walls*, and *bus shelters*. The realizations are single lexical items, except for *bus shelters*, which has two, related by a Classifier ^ Thing structure (Halliday 1985: 164–165). In another semantic field, the superordinate *handling benefits* has *charge up by phone or cheques* and *no risk of getting into debt* as co-hyponymy. Here, the first co-hyponym consists of three lexical items in a Process ^ Circumstance structure (Halliday 1985: 101), and the other also of three lexical items in a Thing ^ Qualifier structure (Halliday 1985: 165–167). Regardless of the realizations, what matters is that the concepts in both the first and second examples are related as hyponyms and superordinates in the contexts realized by the texts of the Concept boards.

Evaluative strategies

The evaluation of the Concept boards consists in the target audience's comparing either the presented Concepts as a whole with other Concepts in terms of the semantic fields in the Concept boards, or in comparing some of the semantic fields in the boards with other semantic fields. In either case, the Concepts or semantic fields used for comparison are drawn from the target audience's cultural context.

The comparison is carried out by means of several types of evaluative strategies. On the basis of analyses of the target audience's responses to the concept boards, I have identified five such strategies in this market research project:

1. Comparing the proposed Concept with competing Concepts in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields
2. Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of what is possible or practical in terms of the concepts that make up the fields
3. Comparing the proposed Concept with the firm's image in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields
4. Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of the target audience's needs in terms of the concepts that make up the fields
5. Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of products the firm has produced so far, in terms of the firm's perceived capability to deliver on the proposed fields

The Concepts or semantic fields that are brought in for comparison are of two kinds: those that realize the target audience's experience of the real world, and those that realize their knowledge of the intertextual context. The two dimensions, the real world and the intertextual, have been pointed out by Eco (1979) among others, although they seem to have originated with the Russian formalists (see Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). It is not always absolutely clear whether a particular Concept or semantic field belongs to the target audience's experience or knowledge, and at times it may belong to both. Much of the time, however, the line between the two can be drawn.

The Concepts used for comparison in strategy #1 seem to realize the target audience's experience and knowledge. By means of this strategy, the target audience attempt to identify whether there is a gap in the market that the proposed product or service can fill. This means comparing the Concepts in terms of the semantic fields that make them up. The information, on the basis of which the target audience decides, derives from both their personal experience of presence or absence of such products or services, and from whether they are advertised or mentioned in the press, on television, in other media, or by word of mouth.

The semantic fields used for comparison in strategy #2 realize the target audience's experience of the real world. They regard their experience of how things work — whether a Concept is realistic in terms of its price, access, and so on.

The firm's image and its semantic fields used for comparison in strategy #3 realize the target audience's knowledge of the intertextual context. What is at stake is the representation of the firm's image in its market communications, which is built up as an accumulation of various semantic fields. Advertisements seem to be the most important in creating this image, but promotions, sponsorship, and other aspects of integrated marketing communications also play a role.

The needs used for comparison in strategy #4 are needs for the proposed products or services based on the target audience's experience and knowledge. The needs commonly arise from the target audience's experience of daily living, but can also be constructed by market communications, with advertisements perhaps playing the main role again.

The semantic field used for comparison in strategy #5 realizes mostly the target audience's experience of the real world. It is about their experience with the firm's products, with which the proposed product or service is compared. On the basis of this comparison, the proposed service or product is judged as appropriate or inappropriate for the firm. For example, can a company that has thus far produced only toiletries be trusted to provide a financial service?

As was stated earlier, the evaluation criteria compare the proposed Concepts as a whole, or one or more semantic fields that make them up, with other Concepts or semantic fields drawn from the target audience's cultural context. This entails two steps. First, the criteria themselves must be related to the Concepts or semantic fields in the boards. Second, they must import the Concepts or semantic fields realizing the target audience's experience and knowledge of the real world and intertextual context. The semantic fields imported from the target audience's experience or knowledge are structured by the same paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations as the semantic fields in the Concept boards.

The evaluative criteria are related to the semantic fields in the Concept boards, or to the whole Concepts, by lexical cohesion and reference. Hasan's (1985) typology of lexical relations is used for mapping out both the cohesive relations and the paradigmatic semantic field relations. For our purposes, there is no need for Lyon's (1977) level of detail, because Hasan's typology is sufficiently explicit and clear.

Although lexical cohesion usually ties together parts of a single text, it can also link different texts that are intertextually related (Lemke 1985), like the strategies and Concept boards. The same is true of reference, which occurs in the strategies and which is a cohesive relationship based on different occurrences of the same participant (see Hasan 1985), most commonly realized by the definite article followed by the rest of a nominal group or by various pronouns.

Evaluation of Concept boards

The application of the evaluative criteria by the target audience results in the Concept boards' evaluation, which can be either positive or negative. Negative evaluation occurs for two main reasons.

First, the authors of the Concept boards may not have used the same criteria for creating the Concepts as the target audience did for interpreting them. In order for the Concepts to be positively evaluated, the criteria used for creating them must match the criteria that are used to evaluate them. This, however, is not always the case.

The authors of the Concept boards did use three of the strategies. Strategy #1 surfaced every so often in their discussions as the issue of whether there was a gap in the market for the proposed product or service. Strategy #3 was implied in the question they asked themselves of why it should be the Z firm in particular to propose the product or service. Strategy #4 was used when they discussed which needs were to be satisfied by the proposed products or services.

Two of the strategies, #2 and #5, used to evaluate the Concepts were not used when the Concepts were created. The application of both of these by the target audience resulted in negative evaluation.

Additionally, the Concept boards were negatively evaluated because the authors did not always correctly identify which particular products or services, realized by the semantic fields or their concepts, would be of interest to the target audience. Some of them did not, in other words, match the products or services of interest used by the target audience for comparison.

To give an example, in a particular instance of strategy #4, which is presented in the next section, a member of the target audience questioned the need for a theme park to have a swimming pool. Although strategy #4 was generally kept account of in the creation of the theme park idea, a concept in the semantic field of ‘relaxation’, viz. a swimming pool, was deemed unnecessary by this member of the target audience. It did not exist as a part of the semantic field of relaxation in the experience of this person.

Semantic fields in ‘Z Extreme Experience’

The first Concept board, called ‘Z Extreme Experience’, presents an original idea of a theme park.[3] It consists of six semantic fields, which are glossed ‘theme parks’, ‘age groups’, ‘roller-coaster rides’, ‘extreme sports’, ‘demolition space’, and ‘relaxation’. The Concept board is reproduced in Figure 1.

The semantic field of ‘theme parks’ is realized by *theme parks* (implied), *Disney*, and *the theme park for guys who want more than just white knuckles* in the text of the Concept board, and its structure is represented in Figure 2 (*H* stands for hyponymy, *A* for antonymy).

The theme park for guys who want more than just white knuckles is the concept that stands for the whole ‘Z Extreme Experience’. It is

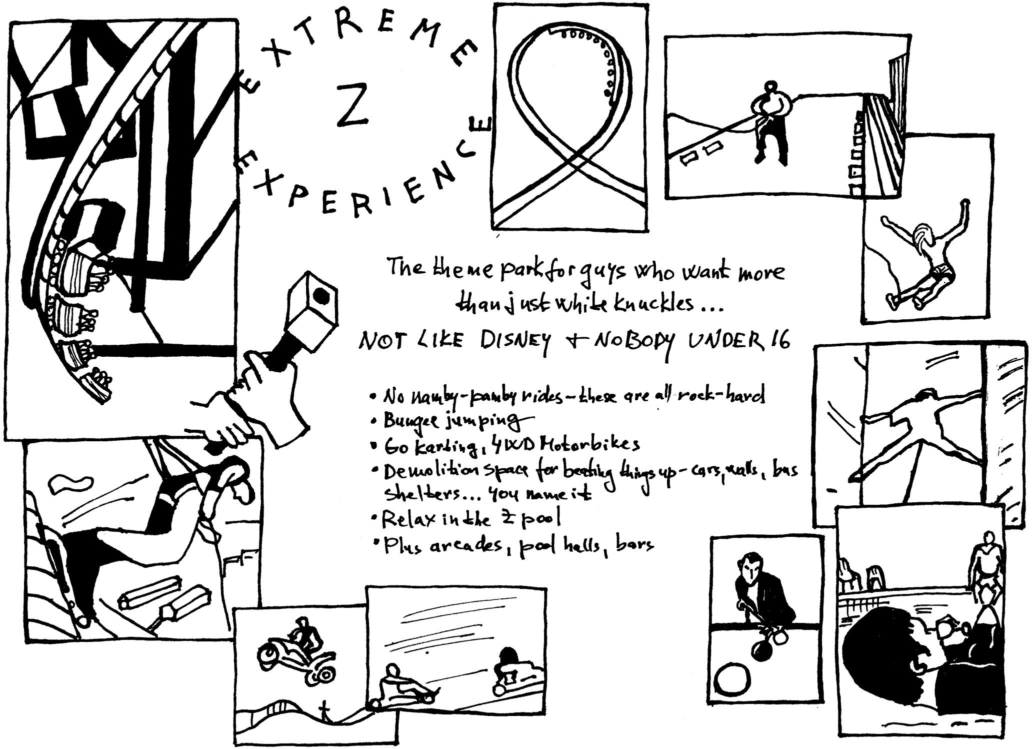

EXTREME
Z
EXPERIENCE
The theme park for guys who want more than just white knuckles ...
NOT LIKE DISNEY + NOBODY UNDER 16
• No namby-pamby rides – these are all rock-hard
• Bungee jumping
• Go karting, 4WD Motorbikes
• Demolition space for beating things up – cars, walls, bus shelters... you name it
• Relax in the Z pool
• Plus arcades, pool halls, bars

Figure 1. *'Z Extreme Experience' Concept Board*

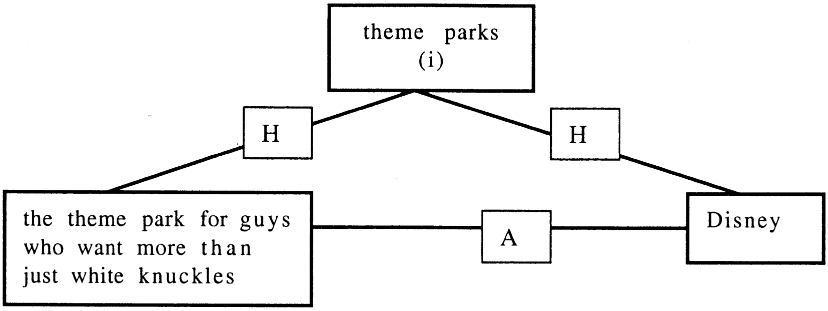

theme parks
(i)
H
H
the theme park for guys who want more than just white knuckles
A
Disney

Figure 2. *Structure of the 'theme parks' semantic field*

explicitly contrasted with its co-hyponym *Disney* in the text (*not like Disney*), which has been captured by labeling the relationship between the two concepts as antonymy. According to Lyons (1977: 294), 'generally speaking, co-hyponyms of the same superordinate will contrast in sense', so it may be objected that labeling the relationship between *The theme park for guys who want more than just white knuckles* and *Disney* as antonymy is superfluous. Many other co-hyponyms in the other semantic fields are, however, not explicitly contrasted in the boards, and the difference would be missed if they were all simply considered co-hyponyms.

The superordinate *theme parks* is not realized in the text and must be inferred. Without knowing that the two concepts being contrasted are both kinds of theme parks, which is not explicitly indicated of *Disney*, the contrast would not make sense.

The next semantic field is 'age groups' and is realized in the text of the board by *nobody under 16* and by images of men and women who look to be over 16 involved in various activities. The semantic field's structure is represented in Figure 3 (*M* stands for meronymy; otherwise as above).

The main relationship that structures this semantic field is between *nobody under 16* in the text and the implied *under 16-year-olds* with which it explicitly contrasts (*nobody* . . .). The two groups of subjects are thus related by antonymy. *Nobody under 16* and *under-16-year-olds* are both kinds of *age groups*, so each is related by hyponymy to this implied superordinate concept.

The images of young people, who are represented as involved in extreme sports or in leisure activities, and who appear to be decidedly over 16, are in a meronymic relationship with *nobody under 16*, because they are all part of that age group. For reasons of space, the second image of a go-karting man, the second image of a roller-blading man, the images of a man riding a four-wheel-drive motorcycle, of a rock-climbing man, of a

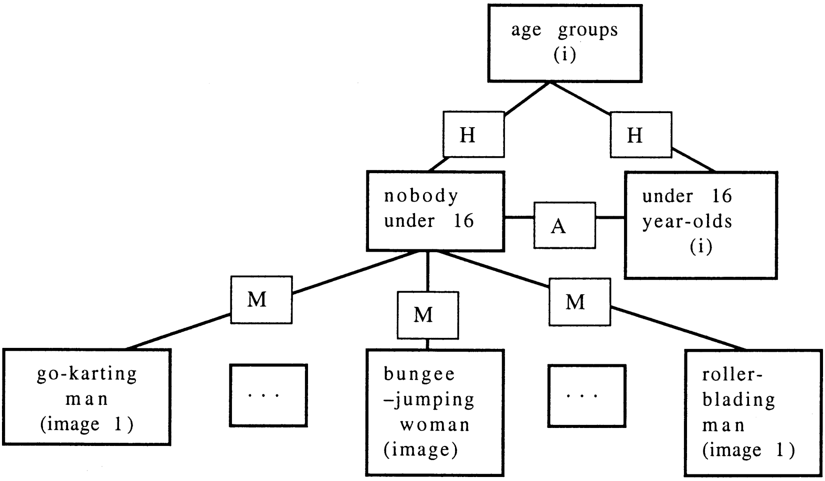


Figure 3. *Structure of the 'age groups' semantic field*

man playing pool, and of two men relaxing in a pool were substituted by dots in the diagram.

The semantic field of 'roller-coaster rides' is realized in the text of the board by *namby-pamby rides* and *rock-hard* (rides) and by two images of roller-coaster rides. Its structure is represented in Figure 4.

Namby-pamby rides and *rock-hard rides* are explicitly contrasted in the text (*no namby-pamby rides — these are all rock-hard*), so they are related by antonymy in the diagram, while at the same time they are both co-hyponyms of implied *roller-coaster rides*. The two roller-coaster ride images are both instances, and more specifically co-hyponyms, of the *rock-hard rides* promised in the text.

The semantic field of 'extreme sports' is realized in the text of the board by *bungee jumping*, *go-karting*, and *4WD motorbikes*, and by images of roller-skating down skyscraper walls (2), bungee jumping, rock climbing, go-karting, and 4WD motorbike riding. Its structure is represented in Figure 5.

Bungee jumping, *rock climbing*, and *4WD motorbikes* in the text and the images of extreme sports are all related as co-hyponyms of the implied superordinate *extreme sports*. There is no explicit contrast set up between them in the text, unlike in the case of the co-hyponyms in the previous three semantic fields.

The semantic field of 'demolition space' is realized by *demolition space*, *beating up*, *things*, *cars*, *walls*, and *bus shelters* in the text and by an image

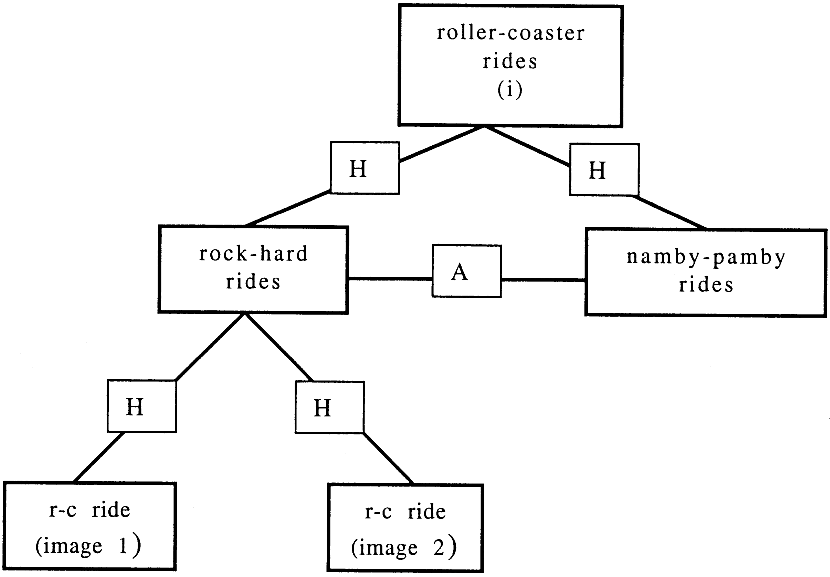

roller-coaster rides (i)
H
H
rock-hard rides
A
namby-pamby rides
H
H
r-c ride (image 1)
r-c ride (image 2)

Figure 4. *Structure of the 'roller-coaster rides' semantic field*

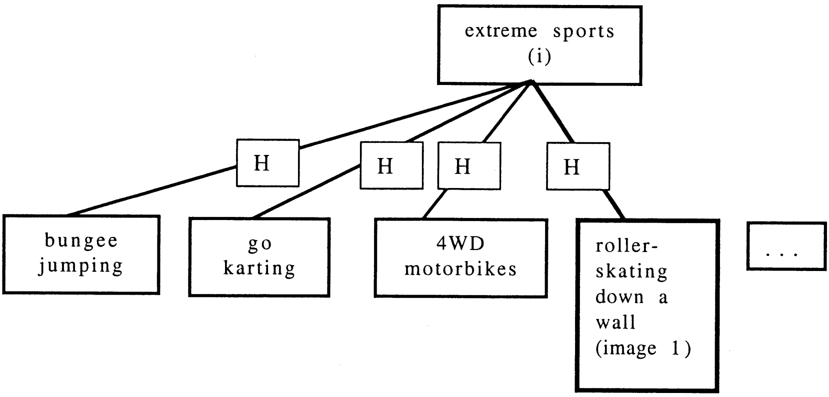

extreme sports (i)
H
H
H
H
bungee jumping
go karting
4WD motorbikes
roller-skating down a wall (image 1)
. . .

Figure 5. *Structure of the 'extreme sports' semantic field*

of hands holding a mallet. Its structure is represented in Figure 6 (x stands for enhancement, + for extension; otherwise as above).

Beating up qualifies *demolition space* circumstantially with the meaning of purpose (demolition spaces are for beating things up, as the text says), and their relationship is thus modeled as enhancement. The meaning of

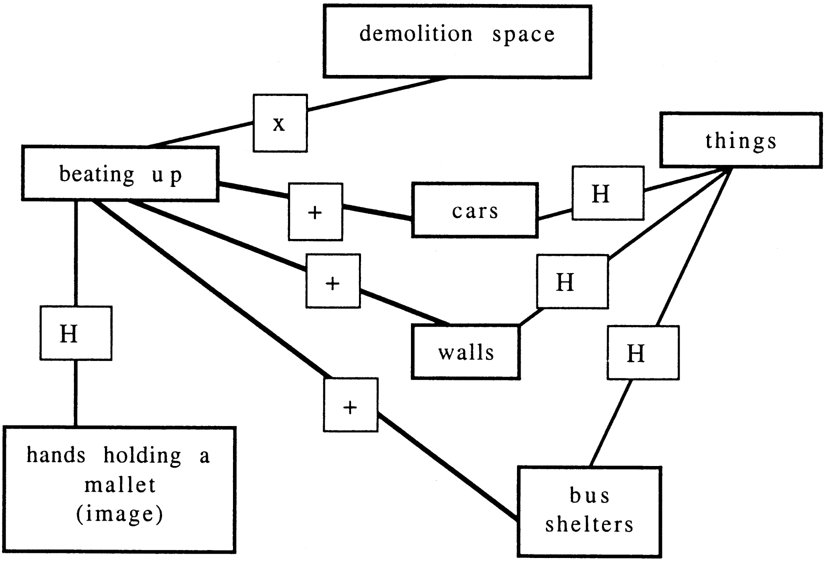


Figure 6. *Structure of the 'demolition space' semantic field*

beating up affects the meaning of *cars*, *walls*, and *bus shelters* and is thus related to them by extension.

Cars, *walls*, and *bus shelters* in the text are related as co-hyponyms of *things*. The image of hands holding a mallet is an instance of *beating up* (beating things up with a mallet is one way of doing so) and is consequently modeled as its hyponym.

The semantic field of 'relaxation' is realized in the text of the board by *relax*, *pool*, *arcades*, *pool halls*, and *bars*, by images of a man playing pool in a pool hall, of a man floating in a pool while drinking a glass of wine, and of a man sitting relaxed on the edge of the pool. The semantic field's structure is represented in Figure 7.

The Z pool qualifies *relax* circumstantially, as a location, and the relationship is thus modeled as enhancement. The same is true of *bars*, *arcades*, and *pool halls*. The processes of floating and drinking, of sitting relaxed, and of playing pool represented in images are all types of relaxing, and so are related to *relax* in the text by hyponymy. At the same time, they are all qualified circumstantially — floating and drinking, and sitting relaxed, by being located in the pool, and playing pool by being located in the pool hall.

I take the image of the pool to be a generic image of a pool — Z Extreme Experience is, after all, in a proposal stage only, i.e. the image says something like 'this is what the Z pool would look like'. This makes it a

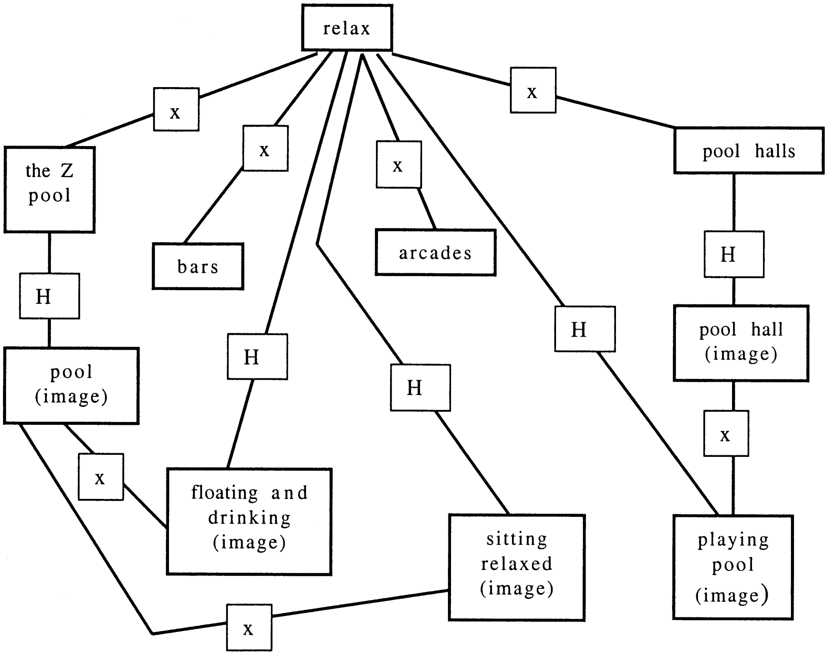

relax
x
x
x
x
the Z pool
bars
arcades
pool halls
H
H
H
H
H
pool (image)
pool hall (image)
x
x
floating and drinking (image)
sitting relaxed (image)
playing pool (image)
x

Figure 7. *Structure of the 'relaxation' semantic field*

superordinate of *the Z pool* in the text. Although the image of a pool hall is similarly generic, it is a hyponym of *pool halls* in the text that represent a still more general class.

Evaluative strategies in relation to 'Z Extreme Experience'

As was stated earlier, there are five evaluative strategies. They are now exemplified in relation to the Z Extreme Experience Concept.

Following is an example of evaluative strategy #1: Comparing the proposed Concept with competing Concepts in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields.

> If it was big and had original things like the roller skating down a thing, it would attract people because people are now sick of Alton Towers and all the rides. (Focus Group #3)

This instance of strategy #1 compares the proposed Z Extreme Experience with another theme park already in existence, called Alton

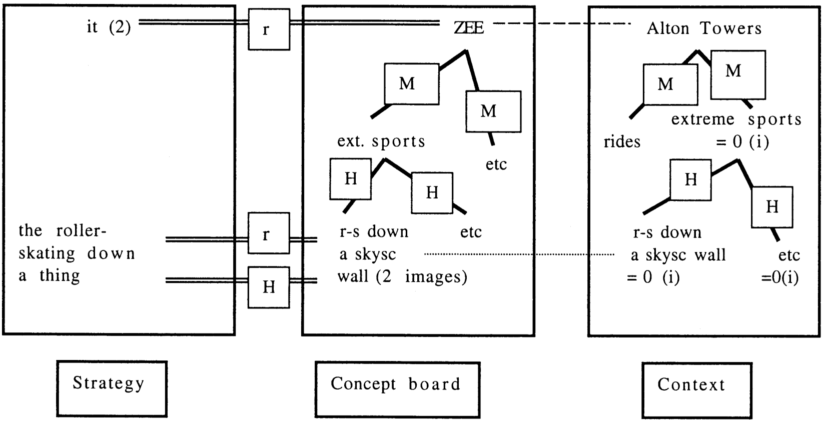

it (2)
r
ZEE
Alton Towers
M
M
M
M
ext. sports
etc
rides
extreme sports = 0 (i)
H
H
H
H
the roller-skating down a thing
r
H
r-s down etc a skysc wall (2 images)
r-s down a skysc wall = 0 (i)
etc =0(i)
Strategy
Concept board
Context

Figure 8. *Evaluative strategy #1 in relation to 'Z Extreme Experience'*

Towers, whose only attraction seems to be roller-coaster rides. The two theme parks are compared in terms of roller-skating down a skyscraper wall, which is one of the extreme sports proposed in Z Extreme Experience. The comparison is represented in Figure 8.

The box on the left frames the concepts in the strategy that relate it to the Concept board by cohesive relations. The box in the middle frames the concepts in the Concept board that the concepts in the strategy relate to, as well as the semantic fields that are compared with those imported from the cultural context. The double lines represent the cohesive relations — *H* stands for hyponymy and *r* for reference.

The box on the right frames the semantic fields or Concepts that are imported from the target audience's cultural context. The lexical semantic relations are labeled the same as in the above semantic fields' diagrams. The dashed line links the Concepts (or at times concepts) that are being compared, and the dotted line the concepts in terms of which the comparison holds.

0 represents the implication that Alton Towers does not have extreme sports, and roller-skating down skyscraper walls in particular. The field of 'extreme sports' with its roller-skating down skyscraper walls is only implied, which is represented by *(i)*. The semantic fields are modeled as meronymy of Z Extreme Experience and Alton Towers because they are part of the proposed and existing theme park concepts.

This example of strategy #1 is related to the whole 'Z Extreme Experience' by reference, which is realized by two occurrences of *it*. At the same time, it is also related to the semantic field of 'extreme sports' by reference and hyponymy between *the roller-skating down a thing* and the two images of roller-skating down skyscraper walls in the board.

Z Extreme Experience is positively evaluated by *it would attract people.* The existing Alton Towers park with its roller-coaster rides is negatively evaluated by *people are now sick of.* The proposed theme park Concept thus obviously fills a gap in the market, and the authors of the Concept board have correctly identified both the criterion for evaluation and the semantic fields of interest to the target audience.

The next passage is an example of strategy #2: Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of what is possible or practical in terms of the concepts that make up the fields. The dashes indicate speaking turns among target audience members.

> How would 16-year-olds get there? —They would have to organize coaches and everything. —If they had something special on. —If you go out on the town, you just say I'm going with my mates and you drive or you go with your family, don't you? But your mum can't just stand outside while you go in there. (Focus Group #3)

This instance of strategy #2 compares the omission, in the board, of the means for 16-year-olds to get to Z Extreme Experience with the practicalities of 16-year-olds getting somewhere, viz. their need for transport. The comparison is made in terms of the most obvious solution, which is going by coach. The comparison is represented in Figure 9 (= signifies elaboration; otherwise as above).

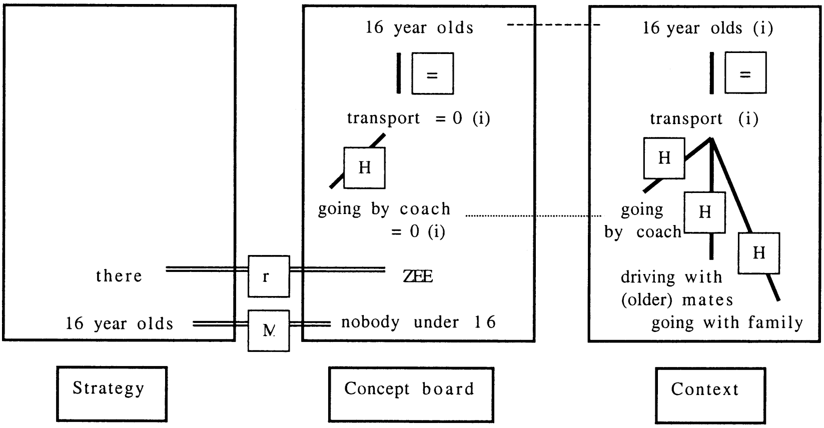

16 year olds
=
transport = 0 (i)
H
going by coach
= 0 (i)
16 year olds (i)
=
transport (i)
H
going by coach
H
H
driving with (older) mates
going with family
there
16 year olds
r
M
ZEE
nobody under 16
Strategy
Concept board
Context

Figure 9. *Evaluative strategy #2 in relation to 'Z Extreme Experience'*

The strategy is related to the whole Z Extreme Experience by reference, which is realized by *there*. It is also related to the semantic field of 'age groups' by meronymy between *16-year-olds* in the strategy and *nobody under 16* in the board. The whole semantic field of '16-year-olds need transport' is imported from the target audience's cultural context, and *0* following the relevant concepts represents their omission from the board. The relationship between *16-year-olds* and *transport* is modeled as elaboration because *need* is a relational:attributive process (see Halliday 1985: 112–128), by which *16-year-olds* may be said to further specify *transport* (*16-year-olds' transport*).

The paragraph cumulatively implies, or evokes (Martin 1999), a negative evaluation of the fact that the Concept board does not mention a means of getting to the theme park. The negative evaluation is implied by *How would 16-year-olds get there?*, which points to a lack of thought for the transport needs of 16-year-olds. It is also realized by high modality (*have to*) in *They would have to organize coaches and everything*, which implies that everything should have been organized as part and parcel of the theme park. Finally, *can't just stand outside* implies negative evaluation of the fact that one's mother would have to wait outside while the boys are having fun in the park.

The reason behind the negative evaluation of Z Extreme Experience in this case is that the authors of the concept did not make use of strategy #2 while creating the Concept.

Following is an example of strategy #3: Comparing the proposed Concept with the firm's image in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields.

> I think it's quite a good idea. I mean it works well with the Z product in terms of relaxing. But also the sport thing, the adventure, and that's why I thought it was a good idea. I think it works quite well. (Focus Group #5)

This instance of strategy #3 compares Z Extreme Experience with the Z image in terms of the semantic fields of 'relaxation' and 'extreme sports.' The comparison is sketched in Figure 10. Only the semantic fields' superordinates are represented.

The strategy is related to the whole Z Extreme Experience by reference, realized by two occurrences of *it*. It is also related to the semantic field of 'relaxation' by repetition (R) between *relaxing* (strategy) and *relax* (board), and to the semantic field of 'extreme sports' by reference and hyponymy between *the sport thing* and *the adventure* (strategy) and *extreme sports* (board).

The semantic field of 'Z image' is imported from the intertextual part of the target audience's cultural context, in particular from the aftershave

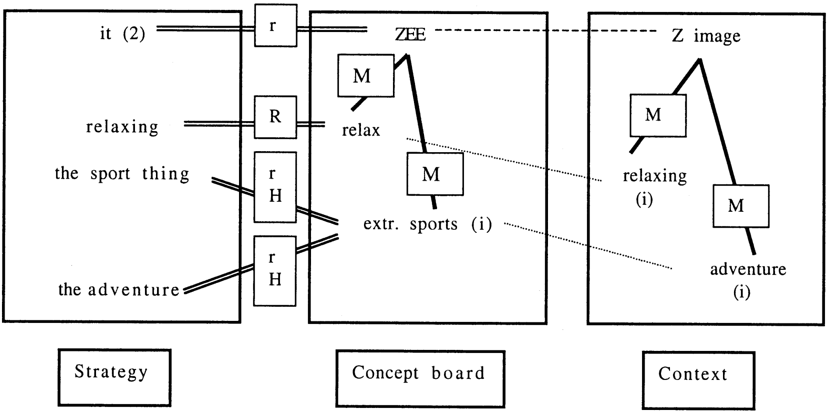


Figure 10. *Evaluative strategy #3 in relation to 'Z Extreme Experience'*

ads. *The Z product* on the surface appears to refer to the product itself, but it is clear from the co-text that what is in question is the image of the product that is projected in the product's advertisements, because there is nothing relaxing or adventurous about an aftershave itself. The proposed Concept and the firm's image are compared in terms of the semantic fields of 'relaxation' and 'extreme sports'. The fact that the Z image consists of relaxation and adventure is only implied in the strategy. The comparison is positively evaluated by *it's quite a good idea, it works well, it was a good idea*, and *it works quite well.*

The next passage is an example of strategy #4: Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of the target audience's needs in terms of the concepts that make up the fields.

> What's the point of paying twenty quid to go to a swimming pool? — Because you go on everything else as well first and then you go in the swimming pool and chill out. (Focus Group #6)

This example of strategy #4 compares the semantic field of 'relaxation' in the Concept board with a similar semantic field realizing the experience of a member of the target audience. The comparison is in terms of the proposed swimming pool, which seems to be missing from the imported semantic field. The comparison is represented in Figure 11.

The strategy is related to the semantic field of 'relaxation' in the Concept board by two instances of *swimming pool*, which are in a hyponymic relationship with *the Z pool* in the text of the board, and in a synonymic relationship with the image of a swimming pool (the image being generic). It is also related to the field of 'relaxation' by *chill out*, which is a synonym

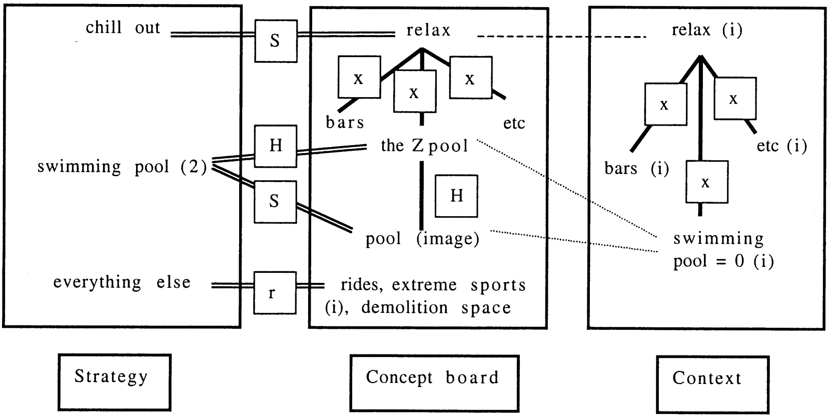

chill out
swimming pool (2)
everything else
S
H
S
r
relax
x
x
x
bars
etc
the Z pool
H
pool (image)
rides, extreme sports (i), demolition space
relax (i)
x
x
x
bars (i)
etc (i)
swimming pool = 0 (i)
Strategy
Concept board
Context

Figure 11. *Evaluative strategy #4 in relation to 'Z Extreme Experience'*

of *relax.* Apart from being related to the field of 'relaxation', this passage relates to the other semantic fields in the Concept board by *everything else*, which is an instance of comparative reference (see Martin 1992).

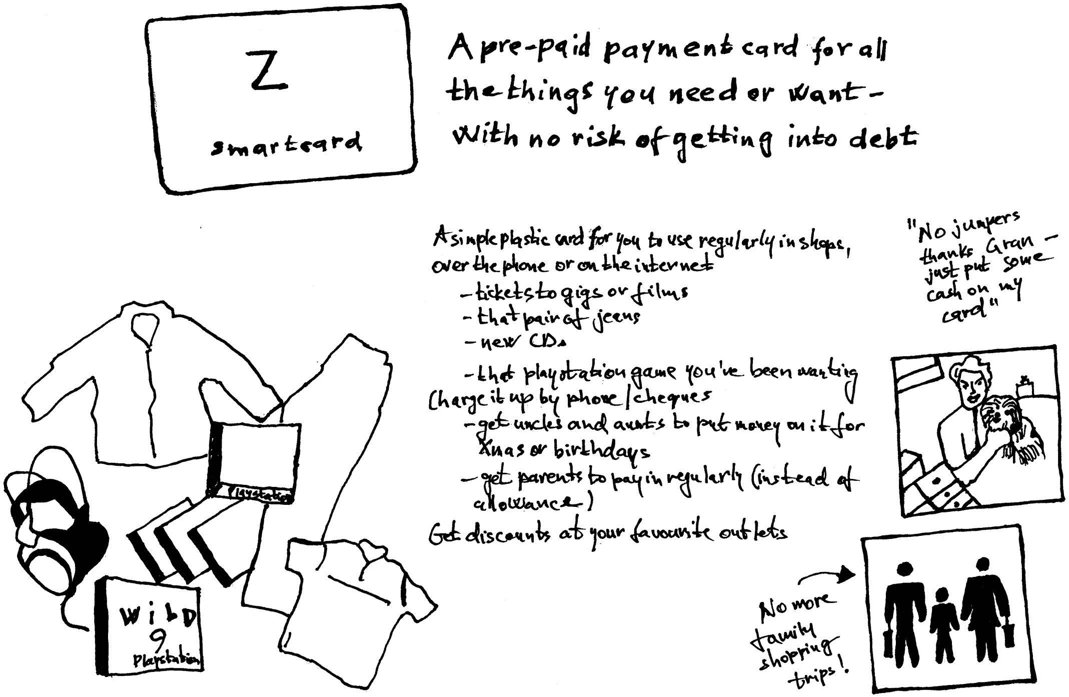
The presence of the swimming pool in the board is implicitly negatively evaluated by *what's the point of paying twenty quid?* The negative evaluation is due to the market researchers' not correctly identifying the need for a swimming pool on the part of this member of the target audience.

There is no example of strategy #5 in relation to Z Extreme Experience, but there is one in relation to another Concept, 'Z smartcard', which is discussed in the next two sections.

So far, we have seen how the evaluative strategies relate to the whole Z Extreme Experience Concept or to the semantic fields that make it up, how they compare them with the Concepts and semantic fields drawn from the target audience's cultural context, and how the evaluations are expressed. It could be objected that exemplifying the model of semantic fields and evaluative strategies by only one Concept board is not convincing enough, and that a Concept board has been chosen that especially lends itself to this kind of analysis. In the following section, I demonstrate that the same model also works in relation to a Concept called 'Z smartcard'.

Semantic fields in 'Z smartcard'

The second Concept board to be analyzed presents the idea of a 'smartcard', a card equipped with an electronic chip, which can be used to shop with various benefits. The Concept can be analyzed as consisting



A pre-paid payment card for all the things you need or want - With no risk of getting into debt

A simple plastic card for you to use regularly in shops, over the phone or on the internet
- tickets to gigs or films
- that pair of jeans
- new CDs
- that playstation game you've been wanting

Charge it up by phone/cheques
- get uncles and aunts to put money on it for Xmas or birthdays
- get parents to pay in regularly (instead of allowance)

Get discounts at your favourite outlets

"No jumpers thanks Gran - just put some cash on my card"

No more family shopping trips!

Figure 12. *The 'Z Smartcard' Concept Board*

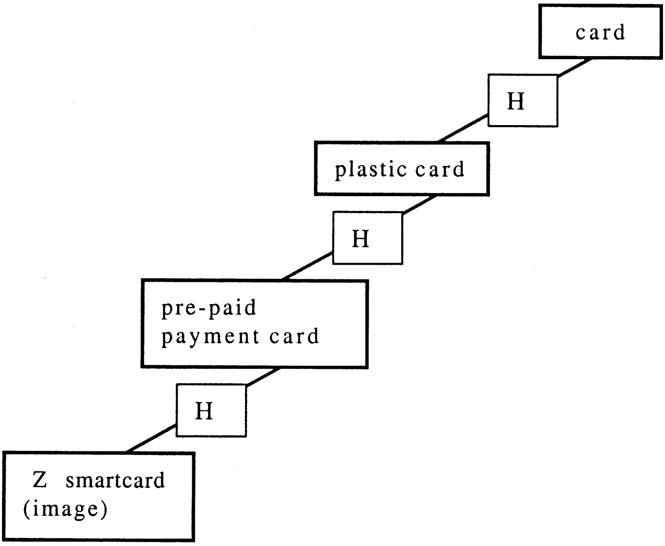


Figure 13. *Structure of the 'cards' semantic field*

of five semantic fields, which are glossed as 'cards', 'shopping benefits', 'handling benefits', 'family members charge up card', and 'products'.

The semantic field of 'cards' is realized by *card*, *plastic card*, and *pre-paid payment card* in the text of the Concept board and by an image of *Z smartcard*. Its structure is represented in Figure 13.

Only the concepts that are actually realized in either the text or image part of the Concept board are included in this semantic field structure. Others are implicit and easily could be added. There are different kinds of cards, of which a plastic card is only one. There are also different kinds of plastic cards apart from pre-paid payment cards. Finally, there are other kinds of pre-paid payment cards than Z smartcard.

The reason for not representing the implicit concepts is that, unlike in the case of the first three semantic fields in Z Extreme Experience, knowledge of such other members of the above semantic field is not necessary for the relationship between the represented superordinates and hyponyms to make sense. The structure of the semantic field is straightforward, with all the concepts related to one another as hyponyms to superordinates, the two concepts in the middle being simultaneously both. All the concepts in this semantic field's structure are realized in either the text or images of the board and there are no implied ones that must be inferred.

The semantic field of 'shopping benefits' is realized by *getting discounts*, *use in shops*, *use over the phone*, and *use on the net* in the text of the Concept board. Its structure is represented in Figure 14.

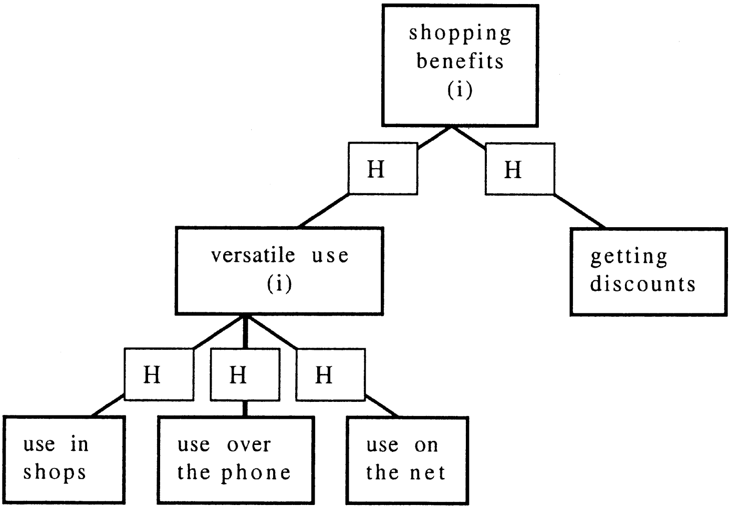

shopping benefits (i)
H
H
versatile use (i)
getting discounts
H
H
H
use in shops
use over the phone
use on the net

Figure 14. *Structure of the 'shopping benefits' semantic field*

In order to map out the structure of this semantic field, two concepts must be inferred, *shopping benefits* and *versatile use*, which function as intermediaries through which the concepts that are actually realized in the text can be related. The result is a semantic field structured consistently by hyponymy.

The next semantic field is 'handling benefits' and is realized by *charge up by phone or cheques* and *no risk of getting into debt* in the text of the board. The two concepts realized by these locutions are related as co-hyponymy of inferred *handling benefits*. The semantic field's structure is represented in Figure 15.

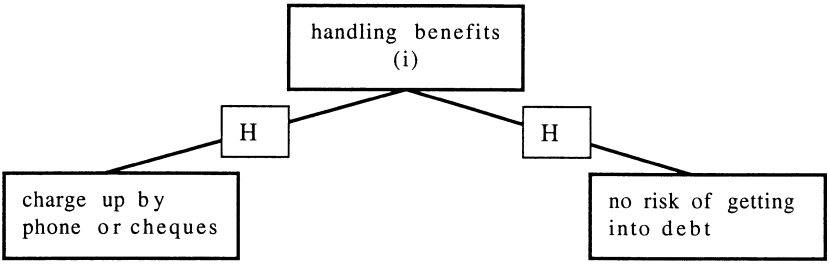

handling benefits (i)
H
H
charge up by phone or cheques
no risk of getting into debt

Figure 15. *Structure of the 'handling benefits' semantic field*

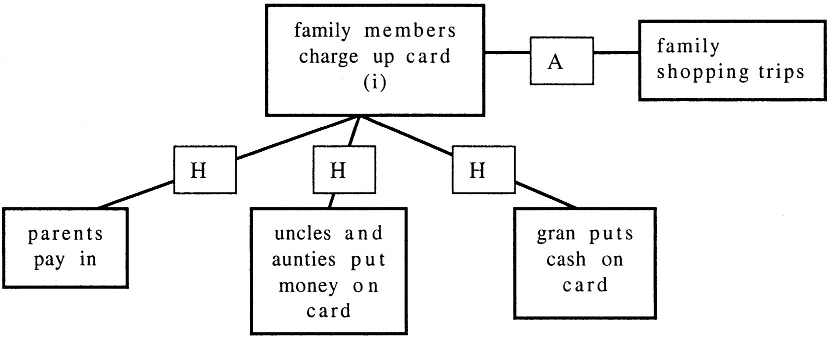

family members charge up card (i)
A
family shopping trips
H
H
H
parents pay in
uncles and aunties put money on card
gran puts cash on card

Figure 16. *Structure of the 'family members charge up card' semantic field*

The next semantic field to be discussed is 'family members charge up card'. It is realized in the text of the Concept board by *uncles and aunts put money on it* (card), *parents pay in*, *gran put(s) cash on card*, and *family shopping trips*. The semantic field's structure is represented in Figure 16.

In this semantic field, the three different ways of the family members' contributing money to the subject's card are presented as an alternative to, and are contrasted with, the subject taking part in family shopping trips (*no more family shopping trips*). The ways of charging the card are thus treated as co-hyponyms of an inferred, more general concept, *family members charge up card*, which is in an antonymic relationship with *family shopping trips*.

The last semantic field that has been identified is that of 'products'. It is realized by *all the things you need or want*, *tickets to gigs or films*, *pair of jeans*, *CDs*, *Playstation game*, and *jumpers* in the text of the Concept board and by images of jeans, T-shirt, Playstation discs, CDs, jacket, and headphones. The semantic field's structure is represented in Figure 17.

Within the semantic field of 'products', a contrast is set up between *all the things you need or want* and *jumpers* (*no jumpers*...), so the relationship is modeled as antonymy and the two concepts as co-hyponyms of inferred *products*. *All the things you need or want* is at the same time the superordinate of the various products listed in the text and images.

Evaluative strategies in relation to 'Z smartcard'

In this section, the five evaluative strategies are exemplified in relation to the Z smartcard Concept.

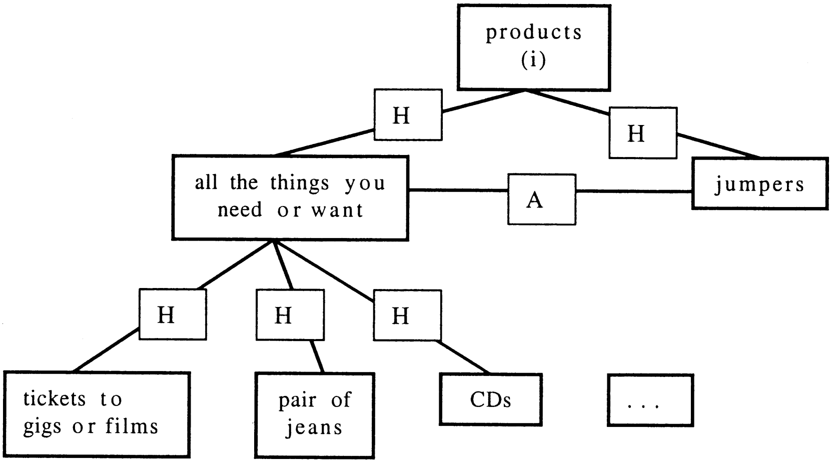


Figure 17. *Structure of the 'products' semantic field*

Following is an example of evaluative strategy #1: Comparing the proposed Concept with competing Concepts in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields.

If I've got a Barclays' debit card that they've given me, I'm not going to need a smartcard. I've got a Switch card, and you can shop anywhere and use it. (Focus Group #2)

This example of strategy #1 compares the proposed Concept of a smartcard with a Switch card, or debit card, and also more specifically with one kind of debit card, Barclays' debit card. The comparison is made in terms of the semantic field of 'shopping benefits', in particular in terms of *versatile use* and of *getting discounts.* The comparison is represented in Figure 18.

This example of strategy #1 is related to the whole Z smartcard Concept by hyponymy realized by *smartcard.* It is also related to the field of 'shopping benefits' by a repetition between *shop* in the strategy and *shops* in the Concept board.

A part of the semantic field of 'cards' is brought in from this person's experience of using Switch cards, or debit cards, and Barclays' debit card more specifically. The structure of the semantic field of 'cards' is obviously different for this member of the target audience and for the authors of the Concept board. The market researchers did not include debit cards in theirs, which would have been a hyponym of *plastic cards* and a co-hyponym of *pre-paid payment cards* (refer to Figure 13).

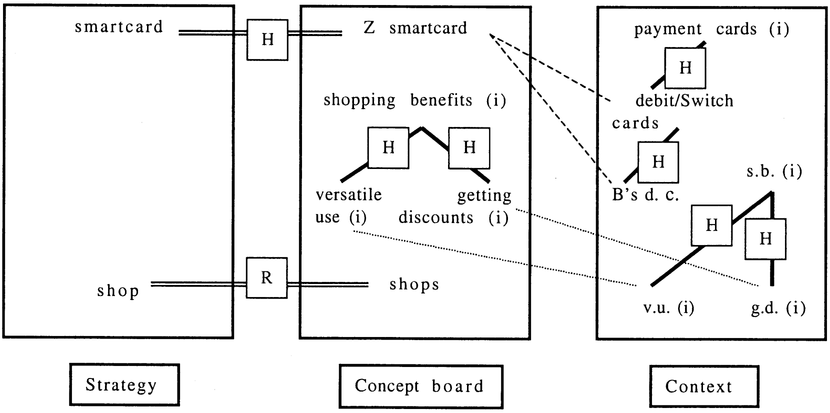


Figure 18. *Evaluative strategy #1 in relation to 'Z smartcard'*

This member of the target audience is implying that debit cards have the same shopping benefits as the proposed Z smartcard, which the board's authors obviously did not think about. The person is, in fact, partly wrong because debit cards are of no use for getting discounts. They are, however, as versatile as the proposed smartcard and are thus a competitor.

The comparison is negatively evaluated by *I'm not going to need a smartcard*, which is due to the market researchers' not taking into account the other payment cards with which Z smartcard would have to compete. According to this member of the target audience, there is no gap in the market at present that the smartcard Concept could fill.

Following is an example of strategy #2: Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of what is possible or practical in terms of the concepts that make up the fields.

> What would you be doing if you've got a smartcard, you'd have to have a Z bank. What machines would you put it in? —They'd have to be, yes, you have to go where you put your money. — You couldn't just phone someone up and get a loan. You'd have to open a bank or something. (Focus Group #3)

This example of strategy #2 compares the Z smartcard Concept with the practicalities of its functioning, viz. the need for it to be linked to a bank. The comparison is made in terms of the bank's automatic teller machines and its attribute of storing one's money. The comparison is represented in Figure 19.

The strategy is related to the semantic field of 'cards' in the Concept board by hyponymy between *smartcard* in the strategy and *Z smartcard*

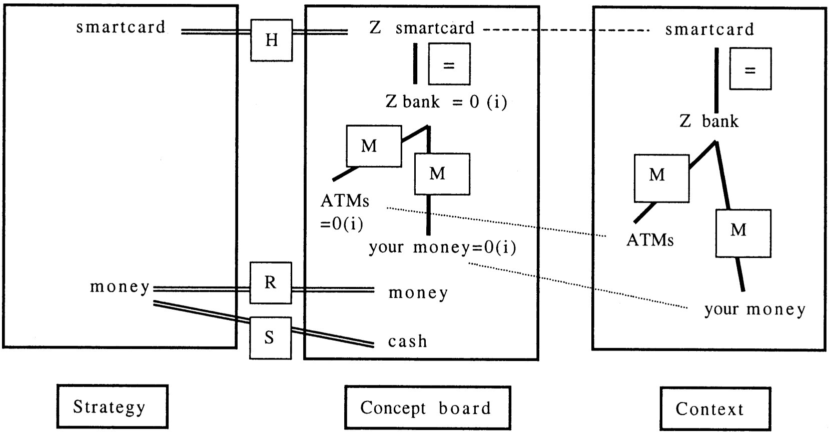


Figure 19. *Evaluative strategy #2 in relation to 'Z smartcard'*

in the board. It is also related to the field of 'family members charge up card' by a repetition of *money* and by synonymy between *money* and *cash*. The semantic field of 'a smartcard needs a bank' is brought in from the experience of this member of the target audience. The relationship between *smartcard* and *Z bank* is of *need*, which is modeled as elaboration (*a smartcard's bank*). *ATMs* and *your money* are represented as co-meronymy of *Z bank* because they are a part of the bank concept.

The comparison is implicitly negatively evaluated throughout the passage by *you'd have to*, *they'd have to*, *you have to*, *you couldn't just*, *you'd have to*. The reason for the negative evaluation is that the authors of the Concept board did not take account of the practicalities of the functioning of the smartcard, i.e. of strategy #2, which is used as a criterion for evaluation.

An example of strategy #3 (Comparing the proposed Concept with the firm's image in terms of their semantic fields or the concepts that make up the fields) is below. It follows, and is interspersed with, an instance of strategy #1, which provides the context and is in brackets.

> (I just don't think there's much room, for me, I don't think there's much incentive for me to use it. It looks like a hassle. If I've got a Barclays' card or . . .) — It hasn't got association, (you don't associate Z with doing things as well.) I don't know. — It's going against the image, I think, completely. (Focus Group #2)

This example of strategy #3 compares the Z smartcard Concept with the Z firm's image, which is brought in from the cultural context. The comparison is represented in Figure 20.

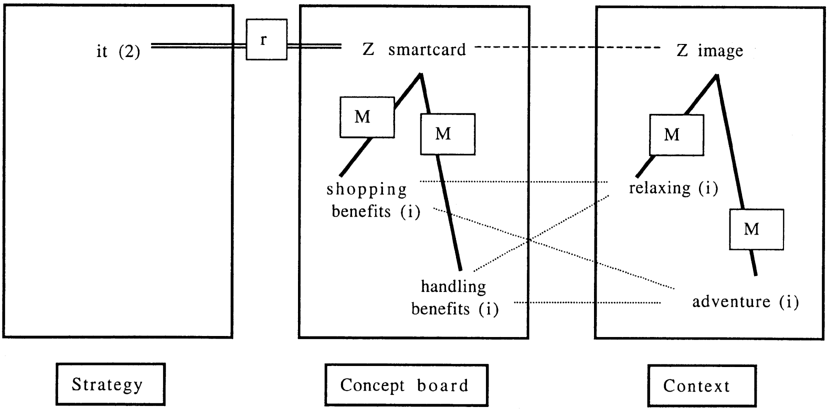


Figure 20. *Evaluative strategy #3 in relation to 'Z smartcard'*

The strategy is related to the Concept board by reference between *it* (2x) and the whole Z smartcard Concept. The Z firm's image, imported from the target audience's intertextual context, is represented as consisting of its two main aspects, *relaxing* and *adventure*, which are thus its co-meronyms.

The whole passage is infused with negative evaluation. This is expressed by a combination of negative polarity *hasn't*, *don't*, *don't*, by the preposition *against*, and the adverbs *as well* and *completely*. The negative evaluation is due to the lack of resonance between the Z firm's image, made up of the semantic fields 'relaxing' and 'adventure', and the fields of 'shopping benefits' and 'handling benefits' that the smartcard Concept is purported to provide.

The next strategy to be discussed is #4: Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the field of the target audience's needs in terms of the concepts that make up the fields, an example of which is below.

I think if they did products that, I think some music, and when it says that new pair of jeans, it depends what make of jeans and that. But I think music and sports and you know, I think that's alright. (Focus Group #2)

This example of strategy #4 compares the semantic field of 'products' on which Z smartcard is purported to offer discounts, with a similar semantic field in this target audience member's cultural context. The comparison is in terms of slightly different concepts in the imported semantic field. The comparison is represented in Figure 21.

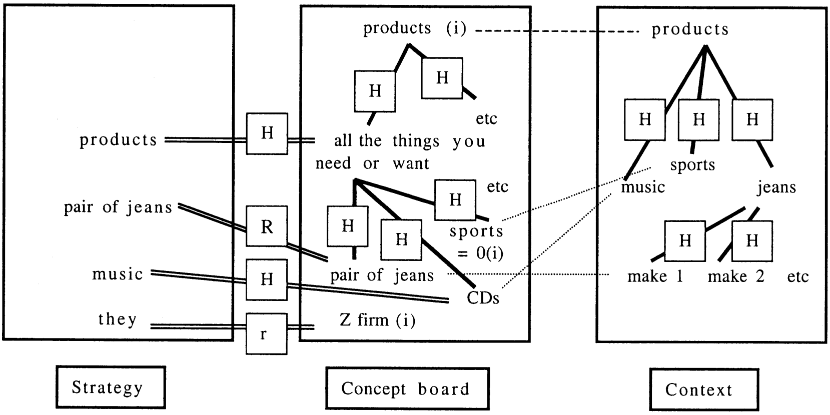

products
pair of jeans
music
they
H
R
H
r
products (i)
H
H
etc
all the things you need or want
etc
H
H
H
sports = 0(i)
pair of jeans
CDs
Z firm (i)
products
H
H
H
sports
music
jeans
H
H
make 1
make 2
etc
Strategy
Concept board
Context

Figure 21. *Evaluative strategy #4 in relation to 'Z smartcard'*

This passage is related to the Concept board by reference, which links *they* in the passage with the Z firm inferred from the board. It is also related to the semantic field of 'products' by repetition and two instances of hyponymy. The repetition is of *pair of jeans*, and one hyponymic link relates *music* in the passage with *CDs* in the board, while the other connects *products* in the passage with *all the things you need or want* in the board.

The smartcard is positively evaluated by *that's alright* on the condition that it offer discounts on music, sports goods, and the right brand of jeans. The sports goods do not actually appear as part of the semantic field of 'products' in the concept board, which does not seem to have a negative effect on the evaluation.

The following is an example of strategy #5: Comparing the proposed semantic fields in the Concept boards with the semantic field of products the firm has produced so far, in terms of the firm's perceived capability to deliver on the proposed fields.

> It's like, I don't know, I think a bank or a building society would give you a better deal as well. Do you know what I mean? Because they know what they are doing. (Focus Group #2)

This passage is a mixture of strategies #1 and #5. It contains both a comparison of the Z firm with possible competitors, and it implicitly compares the proposed semantic fields of 'shopping benefits' and 'handling benefits' with the field of 'products' that the Z firm has produced so far (toiletries), implying that the Z firm is not capable of delivering on its proposal to produce a smartcard with the promised shopping and handling benefits.

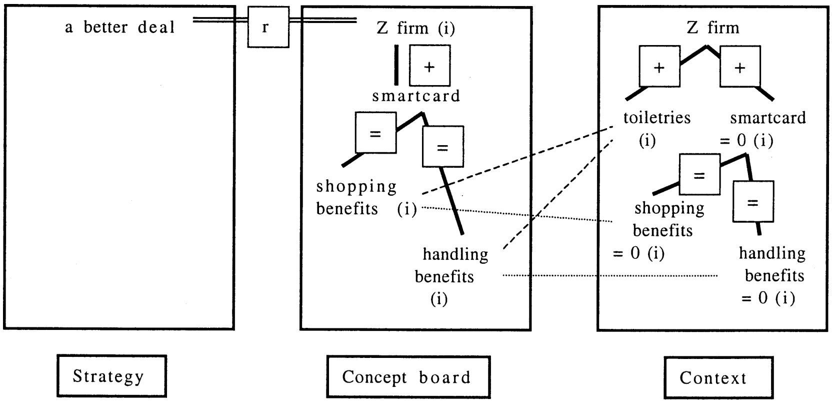

a better deal
r
Z firm (i)
+
smartcard
=
=
shopping
benefits (i)
handling
benefits
(i)
Z firm
+
+
toiletries
(i)
smartcard
= 0 (i)
=
=
shopping
benefits
= 0 (i)
handling
benefits
= 0 (i)
Strategy
Concept board
Context

Figure 22. *Evaluative strategy #5 in 'Z smartcard'*

The comparison, which includes only strategy #5, is represented in Figure 22.

The passage is related to the whole Z smartcard Concept by comparative reference, realized by *a better deal*, which means 'a better deal than Z smartcard can give you.' The implied semantic field of 'toiletries' is imported from the cultural context, as is the implied Z firm and its relationship to the smartcard, with its relationship to semantic fields of 'shopping benefits' and 'handling benefits'.

The relationship between the Z firm on the one hand and toiletries and smartcard on the other is modeled as extension, because they are associated as a producer and a product, which is a material process (Halliday 1985: 102–106). The relationship between the smartcard and the benefits is of attribution and therefore modeled as elaboration. *0* represents the perceived impossibility of the Z firm's producing a smartcard with the purported benefits.

Implied negative evaluation is present in *Because they know what they are doing*. A toiletries firm like Z is not deemed to have the competence to produce a smartcard with the promised financial and usability benefits because it does not have the experience of dealing with such matters. The negative evaluation is due to the concept board's authors' not taking into account strategy #5 when creating the Z smartcard Concept.

Conclusion

A model has been developed of the process of evaluation of complex ideas in focus groups. It consists of semantic fields, which make up the overall ideas or Concepts and of evaluative strategies that are applied to the Concepts by the target audience. The semantic fields were created by market researchers in the hope that they would be of interest to the target audience, and the marketers used some of the evaluative strategies to create the Concepts. Concept evaluation was positive when, in the creation of the Concepts, the researchers used semantic fields consisting of concepts that were indeed of interest to the target audience and when they kept in mind all five evaluative strategies. When they used semantic fields with concepts that were of no interest to the target audience or when they took into account only some of the evaluative strategies, this resulted in negative evaluation.

The use of semantic fields in this model has been inspired mostly by Lyons's (1977) work on the subject, but has been adapted to the instantial contexts realized by each single Concept. The evaluative strategies relate the semantic fields that make up the proposed Concepts to semantic fields imported by the members of the target audience from their experience and intertextual knowledge.

This functioning of the strategies makes them somewhat related to the appeals to 'background knowledge' in text interpretation within the pragmatic tradition (see e.g. Eco 1979, and Brown and Yule 1983 for a survey). The strategies are, however, not used for inferencing, or for filling in gaps, predicting the development of texts, or discovering the intentions of the speakers/writers. They are rather used for evaluating the proposed Concepts, based on the target audience's experience and knowledge of existing competition, the Concepts' practicality, their fit with the firm's image, their satisfaction of needs, and their fit with the products produced by the firm so far.

Background knowledge must be drawn on when inferring the concepts in semantic fields that are not made explicit in the Concept boards' text or images and that are essential for the semantic fields' structure to make sense. It must also be made use of when modeling the semantic fields in the strategies and their relationships to the semantic fields in the Concept boards, because the strategies contain much that is implied rather than explicitly stated.

The process of evaluation of the Concept boards also brings to mind Mukarovsky's (1978 [1938], 1964 [1948]) theory of aesthetic communication, with its interrelatedness of the aesthetic function, norm and value, whereby an artistic text acquires value in comparison with different kinds of aesthetic norms present in the cultural context. The similarity should, of course, not be taken too far, because Mukarovsky dealt with different kinds of texts and 'background knowledge', but the general model of the evaluation process does seem in some sense comparable.[4]

The overall situation of the market researchers' creating the Concepts and presenting them in focus groups to be evaluated by the target audience is reminiscent of Eco's (1992, 1995) model of literary communication. The marketers seem similar to Eco's empirical authors. By using particular semantic fields and evaluation criteria in the creation of the Concepts, they position the target audience as model readers. The target audience members, for their part, seem to play the role of empirical readers. They at times comply with the positioning created by the marketers, in which case they evaluate the Concepts positively, and at times they resist, in which case negative evaluation results.

The research reported in this paper is theoretically grounded, but at the same time it investigates how evaluation of complex ideas occurs in an empirical context. Apart from contributing to the understanding of focus groups, the evaluation model consisting of semantic fields and strategies will, I hope, prove to be generalizable to other situations concerned with evaluation of texts, events, or complex ideas.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Theo van Leeuwen, David Machin, and Kent Grayson for comments on an early draft of this paper.
2. Because the term 'concept' is used to designate semantic field units, the overall idea for a product or service proposed in a concept board is designated as 'Concept' and the board as 'Concept board.'
3. *Z* stands for the name of the firm, which for confidential reasons is not divulged.
4. I find it unsettling to see Mukarovsky being routinely referred to as a 'structuralist' in the same vein as, say, Levi-Strauss, whose objection to Eco's version of a reader-response theory is quoted in Eco 1979. Receiver response is an integral part of Mukarovsky's aesthetics, which can thus be seen as a forerunner of the various more recent reader-response and pragmatic theories of communication (for a further development of this aspect of Mukarovsky's aesthetics, see Vodicka 1976[1942]).

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